

Matt Sprague

Prof. Chang

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Spreading Flame: Responses to Political Self-Immolation in the West

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for Western Christian conscience to understand. The press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors, and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance.

- Thich Nhat Hanh, "In Search of the Enemy of Man"

Self-immolation as a practice has its roots in various religious and cultural traditions but was rarely under the purview of Western civilization until it exploded onto the stage in 1963. The self-immolation accredited with beginning a wave of similar incidents was that of Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who burned himself publicly to bring awareness to ongoing religious persecution (Crosby, 60). Images of Quang Duc sitting calmly in flames, defying his own intense bodily pain, have become enduring symbols of opposition to the forces of oppression. Although some Eastern societies employed self-immolation, most notably through various examples of widow-burning and Buddhist devotional burnings (Crosby, 61), there was no significant history of burning oneself in Western culture. This misunderstanding prompted Thich Nhat Hanh's letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. in which he explains the Buddhist rationale

behind such an extreme political suicide, which naturally was “difficult” for Westerners to appreciate.

Following Quang Duc’s example, self-immolations grew in the Western sphere, particularly in response to the Vietnam War. Norman Morrison, a Quaker in Maryland, burned himself (and nearly his infant daughter) to death outside the Pentagon in 1965. His war protest was applauded by a sympathetic Vietnamese audience while many Americans responded with confusion, sadness, and revulsion (King, 136). UC San Diego student George Winne, Jr. self-immolated on campus in 1970 for the same motivation, provoking decades of discussion on his personal life, choices, mental state, and the ethics of his act. This paper primarily focuses on Morrison and Winne, but various others – Alice Herz, Hiroko Hayasaki, Roger Allen LaPorte – performed similar acts. The results of these protests are somewhat unexpected. Despite the hypnotic power of Quang Duc’s act, self-immolations in the United States often saw relatively little media impact, and public response served to rationalize the suicides, constructing the ‘offenders’ as mentally ill, or otherwise delegitimizing even their most explicitly stated arguments. Nonetheless, certain targeted self-immolations had notable effects on the individuals who may have considered themselves ‘responsible’ (King, 138), and any instance of political suicide is hard to ignore entirely. While most discussion has debated the motivations of self-immolators, this paper will consider whether these protests were effective for their intended causes, and why public responses were so different between Buddhist and Western communities.

First, it is important to consider the religious and cultural perspectives surrounding self-immolation in Buddhism and Western Christianity. As described by Brendan D. Kelly (2011) in an article comparing the two traditions, they both feature a “qualified acceptance of certain forms of self-harm” (Kelly, 299), with some distinctions. In the Buddhist context, self-harm or even

suicide can be admissible as an act of compassion for others. An example is a Jataka story in which a Bodhisattva gives his own life so that a starving tigress would not resort to eating her own cubs; a noble and heroic act on behalf of living creatures (Kelly, 306). In practice, however, Buddhists debated whether the story was to be taken literally, and they typically oppose suicide in its various forms, especially if the primary goal is to escape suffering (Kelly, 313-314). Partial self-immolation was somewhat normalized, due to Mahayana devotional rituals that required self-inflicted burns (Nhat Hanh, 106). Thus, while the general Buddhist community typically opposed suicide by fire, the acts of altruistic suicide and self-burning were not so alien that Quang Duc and others would be unilaterally denounced. The Western tradition also features altruism as an accepted motivator for suicide, especially in cases where a death is meant to save others. Though this interpretation naturally points to the crucifixion of Jesus, other instances of self-sacrifice were understood and accepted, especially following a strict utilitarian perspective. Captain Lawrence Oates, a polar explorer, is hailed as a hero for committing suicide so that his expedition team might survive a food shortage (Kelly, 307). Nonetheless, suicide is typically considered a cardinal sin in the Christian religion. Buddhists tend toward a more cavalier view of birth and death, because reincarnation and the teachings of interbeing insist that we aren't really "gone" after leaving the mortal plane (Nhat Hanh, 52). In the West, the implication of Heaven, Hell, or another variant of afterlife instills a much greater sense of urgency in the decision to die. Most Christians would take issue with the moral teaching of the aforementioned Jataka story, arguing that a human life is too valuable to be sacrificed for wild animals – that the consequences are unacceptable. Therefore, it was certainly difficult for a Western audience to comprehend political self-immolations, where an objective altruistic reasoning is less applicable, and the implications of death are so grave.

Self-immolation in the West was often polemical. Usually the public response acknowledged the goals of the protestor (if they were obvious) but most energy focused on debating their mental state before the act. Extreme acts of self-harm and suicide naturally invite claims of mental illness. Oftentimes, critics use details of the protestor's personal life to argue that they committed suicide for personal reasons under the alibi of a socially conscious protest. Such was the case in public debate surrounding George Winne Jr., a UC San Diego student of Ancient History. He was studying during the escalation of the Vietnam War; friends and family said that he was reclusive and deeply disturbed about the ongoing violence (Joyner, 1). During his time, college students were often drafted after graduating, which naturally contributed to psychological turmoil and prolonged anxiety for student bodies across the United States. Winne had allegedly been drafted only several days before his act (Farwell, 7). On May 10th, 1970, Winne entered Revelle Plaza bearing a sign that read "In God's name, end this war" and lit himself on fire, dying shortly after in a hospital. The *intentions* of his protest are abundantly clear. His decision to self-immolate, however, became a source of debate for years to come, with various viewpoints summarized in a *UCSD Guardian* article written eleven years later by staff writer Paul Farwell. Before his suicide, Winne babysat for an eight-year-old, Norman Misleh, who later brought up that Winne had just broken up with his girlfriend at the time. His college friend, Wayne Dick, took issue with that claim, arguing that Misleh's recollection was inaccurate (Ibid, 7). Meanwhile, Chancellor William McGill attributed the suicide to a "brooding... self-destructive" nature that drew him to self-harm (Ibid, 1). McGill, like several others, criticized his decision, arguing that there "are infinitely many ways of bringing [your protest] to the public without destroying yourself" (Ibid, 5-7). McGill obviously had a vested interest in preventing violence and suicide among the student body, but others shared his viewpoint. A *Guardian*

editor, in an opinion article from 1990, questioned: “One cannot help but wonder if Winne would have better served his cause by fighting for peace instead of dying for it” (*UCSD Guardian*, 4). On the same page, another student trivialized Winne’s death, arguing that he was simply “checking out when the world [became] too much to take” (Ibid). Essentially, many who witnessed the protest found ways to delegitimize Winne’s decision, either commenting about his troubled past or arguing for more traditional protest methods. Not everyone necessarily disagreed with the protest, but Western audiences refused to interpret political self-immolations at face value. I argue that this tendency came from religious, historical reasons as described above, and because American crowds were more removed from the conflict than the Vietnamese who already suffered firsthand consequences. Because of this tendency, extreme methods like self-immolation were in fact much less effective for a Western populace than in Buddhist cultures.

This type of response became a predictable pattern within the US. The self-immolation of Baltimore Quaker Norman Morrison saw more publicity, but also provoked feelings of anger and disappointment within his own community. Morrison, a father of three, drove to the Pentagon in 1965 and self-immolated within eyesight of the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, a key organizer in the Vietnam War effort. Sam Legg, a member of the Friends Meeting that Morrison attended, described that some members of the Meeting “were horrified, scandalized, and very strongly opposed to what Norman had done... we wished Norman had not done this.” Nonetheless, the self-immolation had a strong motivating effect on their own desire to create change – another friend, John Roemer, recognized that “I can’t do what he did, but I’ve got to do something more than what I’m doing” (King, 136).

This personal call to action is where we encounter the strongest results of political self-immolations in the West. General audiences typically opposed the method and failed to see the

gravity of the situation as represented by the immolator. Even so, the power of the image, and the consequences of the act, create a lasting, indelible question: are we doing everything we can do? If there are people *burning* for a cause, can we accept our own complacency? I believe this question is one we all encounter in moments of uncertainty. It has been, for example, a fundamental challenge posed to complacent white Americans during the Civil Rights movement – can we really justify our own inaction? Evidently, Robert McNamara, who did in fact witness Morrison's death, began to ask these questions even as he was directly organizing troop movements. As written in his memoir: "I reacted to the horror of his action by bottling up my emotions and avoided talking about them with anyone – even my family... I believed I understood and shared some of [Morrison's] feelings" (McNamara, 216). Historian Paul Hendrickson argues that Morrison's death drove McNamara to push for de-escalation more urgently. Less than a month after the incident, he was "pushing harder for bombing pauses and other kinds of options and cessations than he'd ever pushed." As Hendrickson describes, "what I fervently believe, and cannot prove, is that Norman Morrison's act became the emotional catalyst for the secret turn" (Hendrickson, 198). It was certainly a strong personal pressure on McNamara, who was strongly emotional about a forgiveness letter sent to him by Morrison's widow thirty years after the fact. When discussing the letter, he acknowledged that Norman Morrison saw him as "responsible for the actions that resulted in his killing himself" (King, 138). If McNamara accepted a level of responsibility, it's quite understandable that Morrison's suicide would drive him to slow down the war. Perhaps witnessing a man blazing outside his office brought the horror of the conflict from faraway lands to McNamara's doorstep. Accepting this interpretation, we can reasonably consider Morrison's protest to be a success. Although alienating many, he drove his own fellow Quakers to take stronger action, and most importantly

he influenced a top-ranking government official to keep the war in check. No doubt McNamara, and others who bore the responsibility for political suicides, felt a deep sense of guilt that motivated them to think about the protestors' sacrifice even months after they died.

It is difficult to comprehend the paucity of media coverage around acts of self-immolation. Quang Duc's protest is largely known for the stunning photography of the event. No Western self-immolations would ever be as powerful; none were planned as part of an organizational protest, and no other individual who self-immolated planned to have a media presence ahead of time. This in itself is puzzling, especially in the case of premeditative self-immolators that undeniably wanted to gather attention; however, very few Americans would be willing to act as an accomplice. Self-immolations are often interpreted within a medical framework as epidemics, where each instance encourages another to do the same – Alice Herz, the first American self-immolator following Quang Duc's death, explicitly stated that she was modeling her act after the Buddhist monks (Crosby, 66). It is quite likely (but not very provable) that local media may have avoided headline coverage in order to discourage others from carrying out similar protests. In George Winne's case, he was strongly overshadowed by a larger trend of unrest – he may have hoped that his sacrifice would become a prominent symbol of the antiwar movement, but in fact it remains relatively unknown. Sparse media coverage was likely due both to the unexpected nature of the protests and the dismissive responses of the general public, constructing self-immolators as mentally ill or otherwise unreliable in their reasoning.

Considering the popular and personal responses to self-immolation in a Western, predominantly Christian context, this form of protest was and is unlikely to effectively connect with a mass audience. Buddhist self-incinerations are, in some sense, a continuation of tradition – for a Western audience, they were difficult to criticize and harder to understand. In the United

States, antiwar self-immolations provoked stronger dissent. A typical response was to invalidate them, by arguing that the protestor was mentally deranged, or condemning their moral decision. Yet, some members of the public, and particularly the intended recipients of the protest, could be deeply moved. Incidents of self-immolation bring an unavoidable sense of urgency to one's decision making. It invokes an eternal question: whether we are really doing enough to support the causes we believe in. Political self-immolation, or any form of self-sacrifice to a cause, is meant to encourage onlookers to act. The criticism of this sacrifice is a key defense mechanism to enable complacency. Self-immolation, of course, is an extreme decision; but most extreme decisions are prompted by extreme realities, ones which critics refused to confront. This refusal is quite evident in some writings about Thich Quang Duc's sacrifice, particularly in a brief article by Angus Fraser (1967). He sets forward the claim that Buddhist leader Tri Quang merely convinced members of his monastery to burn themselves as a devotional ritual, with an ulterior motive to serve his own political agenda against persecution (Fraser, 28). In fact, clear evidence suggests that the self-immolators were not simply unaware – Quang Duc immolated as part of an obvious protest against Buddhist persecution, after making a similar plea himself (Kelly, 310). A Buddhist nun, Nhat Chi Mai, decided to self-immolate to support the peace movement well before she carried out the act (King, 134). Nonetheless, Fraser claimed that Tri Quang was but an evil, Machiavellian leader killing others for his own political stance. Despite clear intentions, Westerners like Fraser often refused to acknowledge the validity of these protests, instead constructing personal reasons why the immolator could not be viewed fairly. In response, we may reconsider Thich Nhat Hanh's perspective: "To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance." Protests of this nature should be interpreted as what they are, in order to respect and appreciate the immense sacrifices of those who carried them out.